

## PERSONAL NARRATIVE, CONSPIRACY THEORY AND (NOT) BELONGING: EXPERIENCES OF WAR, DISPLACEMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT

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*The goal of this paper is to examine affective responses to institutionalised narratives on the genesis, course and consequences of the 1990s conflict in Croatia, which coexist with subjugated knowledge, usually taking the form of conspiracy theories. The paper is based on recent fieldwork research. The author examines the ways of forming different personal narratives dominated by the motifs of home, displacement, (not) belonging, and narratives close to conspiracy theories which are incorporated into personal accounts. The author sees conspiracy theories as an attempt to understand the gravity and ambivalence of every (post) war experience, as a possible loosening of the knot that emerged at the intersection between the personal and the collective, the cognitive and the emotional, ethnic identity (be it majority or minority) and citizenship, the desirable and the undesirable, home and leaving home.*

**Keywords:** *personal narratives, conspiracy theory, fear, anxiety, displacement, (not) belonging, subjugated knowledge, popular knowledge*

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH AND THE RESEARCH (OP)POSITION

On several occasions during 2017, with the primary goal of researching fear narratives and post-war anxiety,<sup>1</sup> I conducted fieldwork in a small area in Lika,<sup>2</sup> a region of Croatia with a complex history of conflict and violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Colleague Ivona Grgurinović from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of

The fundamental hypothesis, elaborated over time, and the main reason for choosing that locality, is the fact that Lika, due to a history of conflict and violence (World War II, war of the 1990s), is an anxiety-filled space. The other premise is that the dominant national and regional narratives about Lika dissolve in “small narratives”. In other words, my interest is twofold, and it is situated at the intersection of the image of Lika as a space of collective anxiety (Gaus 2003:48–59)<sup>3</sup> and the complexities and contingencies of everyday life.

The idea was to explore the contextual conditioning, polychronic time and psychological complexity of each narrative describing horrible, traumatic and eerie experiences, with the emphasis on their complex reception, response, and the channels of narrative transmission (cf. Bendix 2000), which is the main goal of the project I am working on, *Narrating Fear: From Early Records to New Orality*.

Renata Salecl says that the different ages of anxiety in contemporary history have come in periods after major social crises, “especially after the wars” (Salecl 2004:1). Past wars, as well as all other events important for the community, generate fragmentary, contradictory and conflicting narratives which seek verbal resolution in every new act of communication, evoking ever greater contradictions, fears, a sense of injustice, deprivation, incompleteness. Every period of heightened anxiety has a different etiology which evokes a characteristic collective response. The complex and confusing history of the interlocutors’ (not) belonging is specific for the locality in question, as well as important for (this) research. This specificity, affected by globalisation and the passing of time, processed the local knowledge, the confusing personal experience and the narratives about them as part of a bigger picture of power relations, not only national, but also global. To study the experience of migration, Sara Ahmed says,

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Zagreb participated in all of the fieldwork, while student colleagues Lorena Drakula, Dinko Duančić and Tijana Tadić joined us on one occasion as part of their field course.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Gaus thinks that anxiety is a strictly individual matter. We can talk of collective anxiety only when “a large section of the population is threatened by the same disaster” (Gaus 2003:48). Collective anxiety implies an awareness of the fact that a group member knows that others are anxious as well. It is often preceded by a period of collective fear with the same premise.

does not mean merely to study “how migration challenges identity, but how migration can allow identity to become a fetish under the sign of globality” (Ahmed 1999:338).<sup>4</sup>

The research encompasses an area of approximately 30 square kilometres, specific in many ways. In order to protect the identity of the informants, I will not name the particular microspace,<sup>5</sup> especially because its precise definition would not contribute significantly to the understanding of the text that follows, and it could produce unwanted effects. My intention is to explore “small narratives”, individual and personal perspectives on the hardships, without an attempt to reconstruct the war events or provide an ethnography of a certain space and time with a temporal distance. That does not mean that the narrated context and the context of narration are not important in examining the phenomenon – on the contrary. The research premise is that narration and remembering are intersubjective acts, i.e. a practice which does not involve only remembering one’s past experience and narrating it, but also remembering for the other (cf. Smith and Watson 2001:20). I consider memory, remembrance and narration to be not only a contextual, but also an intersubjective activity in which many agents, individuals, cultural forms, social norms, historical circumstances, effects of legal regulation, lived experience, folklore patterns of narrating about life, etc., are engaged. Personal narratives are not only personal. They are shaped through processes of co-narration (cf. e.g. Borland 2017), co-cognition and joint remembering or reminiscing (cf. e.g. Fivush et al. 2005).

All of this notwithstanding, I do not think that not writing in detail about the context of the narrated events would be irreparably harmful for the understanding of the analytical focus and interpretation. I think that listing facts about the space and events would hinder the writing process and produce more questions than answers in the already conflicting, divided society burdened by conspiracies of silence and denial (Zerubavel 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the meaning of space and place in the process of identity formation in the context of violence in Croatia, see Povrzanović 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Such was the practice of Stef Jansen in his elaboration of the results of his research in the same region. He arbitrarily attached colours to places where he did his research in order to differentiate between and compare them in his analysis (cf. Jansen 2002, 2006).

Silence is for Zerubavel a “soft” version of taboo (*ibid.*:29). He notices that everything we ignore as members of society, we also ignore as researchers (*ibid.*:13).

Writing about the controversial aspects and neuralgic spots of one’s own society is never entirely comfortable, especially if one wants to approach them responsibly and reflectively. Emphasising the researcher’s responsibility as early as in the introduction not only sounds unusual, but, to a careful reader, also reveals the unease of the author, who cannot fully comprehend the historical events connected to the lived experience. Emphasising the researcher’s responsibility, apart from reflecting unease, is a consequence of the personal conviction and the epistemological decision that I cannot (nor do I want to, or know how to) describe the war. As any other war, it is a set of diverse experiences initiated and led by different agents, affects and circumstances, policies and interests, media strategies (on the media narrativisation of the war see Vasiljević 2009), etc.

I see my role as a researcher primarily in recording and interpreting fragments of experiences which, for years, had been constantly narratively (re)shaped, especially in the genre of personal narratives as defined and used in folklore studies (see Bausinger 1958; Stahl 1977a, 1977b; Dégh 1985; Braid 1996), or the form known as the narratives of personal experience as conceived by Labov and Waletzky (1997) and later used in numerous disciplines.<sup>6</sup> I do not only deal with these forms, but I try to examine them within the entire oral tradition of the community whose members took part in the research. Some narratives have been (re)shaped by silence, suppression, and aberration of memories that remain as unverballed anxious residue in the background of the total experience of life.

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<sup>6</sup> Personal experience narratives are everyday performances by “unsophisticated speakers” and are seen as “basic narrative structures” (Labov and Waletzky 1997:3), and are also designated as the “prototype of narrative activity” (Ochs and Capps 2001:3), i.e. as “fundamental narrative structure” (Labov and Waletzky 1997:3). Personal narratives as defined by Stahl are narratives with a repetitive pattern (Stahl 1977a:3). On the problems of defining the folklore genre of personal narratives see Marković 2010:62–69. For the sake of simplicity, I will not distinguish between them here, but will use the common term “personal narratives”.

The intention of the text is by no means to contribute to the explanation of the causes, course and consequences of war on the aforementioned area, but to contribute to the understanding of the conflict as disintegrating, unintelligible, confusing for “common people” and entire communities. Such a condition is often irreversible because new narrations which reshape the memorised experience cause new (re)integrations, new blind spots, and confusing affective interpretations despite the universal human tendency to form coherent narratives about one’s own experience and history.

When discussing the war events and everyday life in the researched microregion, it is important to note that it is very specific in terms of geographic position, traffic (dis)connection, population structure, discrepancies between dominant narratives, ideologies and personal experience, memories of World War II, the post-war period, etc. I am not familiar with specific circumstances that could shape the narratives of fear and anxiety in other microlocations in Lika. I am not competent to speak about these differences. My intention is not to write an ethnography of war and the post-war period in a certain space, but to focus on researching the narrative articulation of fear and trauma caused by the experience of war.

The main goal is to approach the narratives of conflict, displacement and return not as a series of historical events in the context of oral history, but as an affective response to lived experience, the dominant narrative, as well as the gap between them.<sup>7</sup>

I will analyse the circulation of emotions and affects not only as the triggers of events, but also as powerful triggers and formative agents of personal and less personal narratives. In this respect, I will analyse the formation of different personal narratives dominated by motifs of home, displacement, (not) belonging, and narratives close to conspiracy theories which, explicitly or implicitly, as somewhat complete stories or just fragments, are incorporated into the aforementioned personal narratives, or accompany them as a final formula (coda). Sometimes they do not follow each other immediately, but can be causally connected within the interview as a whole, as a combination of the cognitive and the affective response

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<sup>7</sup> On the difference between personal and official narratives about the war of the 1990s see Jambrešić Kirin 1996, 1999.

to the painful experience of displacement. I see conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledge or a form of popular knowledge about the events (usp. Birchall 2006) which undoes the knot, in a narrative sense, that appears when it is difficult to comprehend the complexity and dissonance of the “big narratives” on (not) belonging, the lived experience of (not) belonging, and the related affects and emotions.

### **(NOT) BELONGING: THE INCLUDED, THE INVITED, THE (SELF) EXCLUDED**

In order to understand the interpretation of the collected narratives, as I already mentioned, it is crucial to demonstrate the complex and confusing history of the narrators’ (not) belonging: in the period after World War II, and before the 1990s conflict, they were equal citizens, and members of a constitutive nation; at the beginning and during the conflict, they were unwanted citizens of an unwanted nation and religion, (self)excluded citizens, wanted residents of the occupied territory, formally invited and unwanted citizens at the same time; directly preceding and during displacement, they were both invited and (un)wanted foreigners, enemies in the ancestral “homeland”, wanted in the new place of residence because of their ethnicity, but unwanted based on local identity and origin, welcome in some microlocations, unwelcome in others; upon return they had a deep sense of belonging to the microlocation, but were still unwanted citizens of an unwanted ethnicity and religion.

What is confusing in the context of (not) belonging could be described as the gap between the sensory conception of localness, which “intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers” (Ahmed 1999:341) and Anderson’s (1991) imagining communities as well as the related “ethnic engineering” (Štiks 2016:249–262) and denaturalisation processes (Hayden 1996:793).<sup>8</sup>

The following examples contain personal narratives dominated by motifs of home and (not) belonging, the mindlessness of war and injustice,

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<sup>8</sup> For Robert M. Hayden, the denaturalisation process is the transformation of “residents who had been equal citizens of federal Yugoslavia into foreigners of their own republics” (Hayden 1996:793).

in which periods before the war intertwine with and are related to the wartime period, the period of displacement, as well as the period upon return. Dual motifs of home (and when home is far away), as noticed by Avtar Brah, can be recognised in the examples. She differentiates between home as the place one lives in and home as the place one “comes from”, including the category of affect: “Where is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination”, in which territory is understood as the place of ‘origin’, and on the other, “home is also the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells” (Brah 1996:192).

#### Example 1:

- Who had the right to kill or poison ten of my dad’s cows, thirteen pigs and hundreds of hens, who had the right to do that? The gun wasn’t even found. Who is that person? [...] And he built all of that [the house] with his bare hands. He didn’t get a loan, he didn’t steal from anyone. His work earned him all of that. And somebody destroyed it overnight. Never again. He has five-six cows, not ten anymore. My family keeps up the tradition, everybody works, it’s a modern farm, you can get lots of money out of it, cheese, calves, milk. That’s what Lika should be like.

#### Example 2:

- It’s horrible, well, he [the son] made me come back, he said I won’t live here [in displacement] anymore and I won’t go to school here. He started the first grade of high school and said: “Mom, I won’t go to school here anymore”. He didn’t want to speak Ekavian, he didn’t want to write in Cyrillic. He is rebellious like that. His class teacher called me, she taught the Serbian language, I was already one month pregnant. I came to the school and asked: “What did you do?” He said: “Nothing, mom.” He was fifth grade then. And I go to her. I say: “What did he do?”. “He could have an A in Serbian if he wrote in Cyrillic and spoke Ekavian.” “Ma’am, is there a grade between an F and an A?” She says: “Yes, a D is between an F and an A.” “Give him a D and leave him alone.” He never wanted to write in Cyrillic and Ekavian, that’s his revolt. “I won’t be where I don’t want to be.”

Example 3:

- How was it there for you? [in displacement]
- Terrible. Not bad. Not bad, terrible. [...]
- Unbelievable. You are nowhere and you are not a part of anything.
- No, no, that's not true. I have always been a part of Croatia and I always will be. When I came back home after... It was like this. So I left in 1995. Three years later, I took a deep breath when I arrived in Croatia and I said: "My God, how I missed this air." You are, you belong to where you were born, where you grew up. Wherever that is.

Example 4:

- You arrive there [in displacement]. All of a sudden, you're a nobody. [...] All of a sudden, you arrive there and you are some kind of... You're always, you're always an immigrant. You always remain on the margins of society. It was always difficult to fit in. [...] I've told this story a hundred times. I arrived there as a kid. I was already in high school. [...] And you fit into the society a little. There were many refugees and so on. [...] And there was this girl, I mean, it was childish love, I don't know, 18-19 years old, everything is great and then she starts working at a radio station. And the story is over. She says: "I'm a radio star now, and you're just a refugee. You're just a refugee." I mean, I don't know what... It stuck with me I guess. I will remember those words forever, and I'm grateful to her. I don't know where that girl is. I would like to see her and buy her lunch. I don't know what happened to her, I don't know anything about her, and I would like to see her again. [...] And when she told me that, I thought to myself: I'm going to do something with my life. It doesn't matter that I lost everything, I'm going to do something with my life. Her words got to me... Like, all of a sudden, you're a nobody. [...] You're a nobody, you're a refugee, you're an alien.

Example 5:

- [the interviewee returns to her house] I say, I don't need pills. As soon as it dawned, I came here and then I... I went in here. No doors to be seen, no windows. But there's a blanket. The basics are there. They're there. [...] There are no doors or windows, but nothing burned down.



[...] And he [the husband] told me when I left, he told me: “Go there and sell it for what you can get.” He used those words precisely. To sell it and to go back? And I called him, I told him to come, to come here. I said: “This is where life is.” When I somehow got to my, somehow I got to my walls, my house, my... There [in displacement], I’m grateful to everyone there, but you’re not attached there, you’re not attached. There’s nothing to keep you there. Here you were raised, you were born.

The following analysis, I believe, can be applied to a great extent to other conflicts and interethnic relations, other wars and other individuals. Although personal narratives shape the specific and personal, the narrator can borrow themes, symbols, techniques of oral formulation of experience from collective narrative heritage, which corresponds to the human need to explain one’s own experience, as well as the emotional impulse and emotional response to it (cf. Marković 2008:124–125). Different forms of narrating life, personal and/or collective experience are socially and culturally conventionalised forms through which past experience is organised and represented (cf. Bruner 2004). Personal narratives with hints of conspiracy theories can be seen as spaces where discourses and cultural images can be integrated, disintegrated and rejected within different narrative contexts, in alternation and many times over (cf. Eakin 1999:371; Marković 2008:127). The goal is to shed light on these processes in all of their complexity, contradiction and often elusiveness.

To expose the contingency of everyday life, to shed light on voices dispersed on the fringes of legitimised knowledge is in many ways dangerous for the stability of “historical truth” as the foundation of a certain community’s identity, both for those who “expose” and those who are affected by (real or construed) anxiety.

My interviewees underlined their own awareness of the fact that their account is just one of many. They emphasised their being in heteroglossia, with a layman’s understanding of the theoretical postulate that a singular “historical truth” does not exist anymore, i.e. that its purpose is the cultivation of political myth and (national) narratives. For example:

- History is definitely written by winners. You will hear many versions of the same event, depending on who is talking and if they’re just telling or they participated in it.

Or:

- If you didn't listen to my side now, sitting on the other side, you would say: impossible, it wasn't like that. Only when a person listens like we listened to the story... I cry over Vukovar every time. I cry over it. Somebody does, somebody doesn't. When you see those poor people, those bags, that sorrow, pain and misery... They're going, but where? And then you think of yourself. Vukovar made the deepest impression on me. Not to mention that it was arranged, that they were sacrificed, put on the hit list, an entire city, a human being. But come on... Who would admit that they signed it?

Or:

- Screw that, the right to one truth. That's always dangerous. The right to one truth always leads to some form of fascism. Always. Right towards it. Yes, if you want to prove the truth, nobody wants to listen. And we go back again to the fucking pistol. You listen to the one with a bigger pistol.

## **ETHNOPOLITICS, DISPLACEMENT AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

Narratives with elements of conspiracy theories that penetrate the narrative formulation of a person's own experience of displacement marked by fear and trauma can be viewed as an attempt to understand the personal experience of conflict as a possible resolution of the quandary arising at the intersection of the personal and the collective, the cognitive and the emotional, of ethnic (majority and minority) identity and citizenship, the wanted and the unwanted, home and abandonment, perpetrator and victim. The narratives which we recognise as conspiracy theories, similar to legends, rarely constitute a whole narrative, a coherent explanation, and are often incorporated in other narrative forms as fragments, allusions, associations, etc. They can partly be emancipatory, but also victimising narratives.

Almost thirty years have passed since some of the events narrated about. From this perspective we cannot know how and when narratives with elements of conspiracy theories came to be, and in what contexts they were

formed and transformed. What we do know is that today, globally and locally, they are an important factor in understanding history from below, and that they coexist as popular knowledge on the individual and the collective level, as a result of the interference between mass media and oral communication. We should consider them temporary. We can assume that the time that has passed since the war has shifted the focus of narrative formulation from fear and trauma to anxiety and unprocessed (intergenerational) trauma. Conspiracy theories, as any other narrative pattern belonging to a community's oral tradition, owe their "continuity" to multiple modifications: dehistorisation, transformation from believing to not believing, towards a stage of decline, fragmentation, etc. (cf. Bošković-Stulli 1978:42).

To start off the discussion on conspiracy theories and their role in the affective and cognitive articulation of experience of return, I will first list several examples.

The following example connects motifs of rebellion and war, being home and far from home, belonging and not belonging, with elements of conspiracy theory:

- That Easter [the beginning of the conflict], on this day, we were all in our homes. We had no idea what was going on. All of a sudden, there's people talking about a rebellion. What? Some paramilitaries gather. You have no idea about anything. All of a sudden, they accuse you: you are all the same. All of whom? All of whom? You never did anything against this country, and then you ask: can I come back? I can come back. This is my country. It's the most beautiful country in the world. The only country I can love. There's no other. There's nobody who can give this back to me. I lived in Novi Sad for six years. I cried all the time. I want to be here. It's a difficult life, but this is my Lika [...]. We're not all the same. It was always... Like I said. One feeds you, another hits you. That's what 1991 was like. Some lived a peaceful life, cutting grass, sowing, ploughing, keeping cattle and sheep. Others were like: give me a gun, I want to fight. Fight whom? Who actually won over whom? Was it just to tell history one day? Who paid for all that? Just to prove whose fault it is. Was it America, Germany, was it really Croats and Serbs? Just so they can say: the war was fought between this and that. It was a bitter war. A sad one.

In the second example there are elements of conspiracy theories whose function is to explain the causes of the frightening experience of displacement, as a counterpoint to personal narrative.

- He doesn't like to talk about that because... Again, it's a matter of upbringing, you see. As the difference between the two of them [her children] is six years, I thought he was a reasonable kid already. He was very happy that he was getting a sister, and since she was born, we raised him to appreciate and look after her. At those moments, he was trying very hard to look after his little sister, he hugged her all the time, held her close. While we were traveling, for example [...] my son was holding his knees to his chest so that his sister could lie down. He doesn't like to talk about it. He doesn't. He's a man now. He probably sees it differently than I do as their mother. [...] That moment wasn't any of my neighbours' fault. It's the fault of some bad people who benefited from that. I hope it's on their conscience.

The function of conspiracy theories in the third example is the narrative formulation of fear and the anticipation of historical evil that can arrive at any moment and cause new displacement and loss of home. It is also used in the broader, global context of peacetime social life and increased (be it real, symbolic or digital) violence in the everyday life:

- The only thing I'm afraid of is high politics. That the same scenario could be provoked again, not by common people, but by big shots in the scene.
- Today, life is such that the fact that someone can barge in and change your life has nothing to do with war. We live in an age when threat is everywhere. Many things can affect your life, and they can come from anywhere. Look at what Facebook does to children. No war can do that. Killing themselves.

The fourth example describes conspiratorial national politics that allegedly led to the disintegration of multinational communities and displacement.

- D: [...] At that time there was more talk about politics maybe, about an arrangement so to speak, about treason. [...] And then out of nowhere, they said move, get your things, leave.
- J: Yes. Get your things, there's no alternative. Get them and go.

[...]

- J: You sleep in sheds, in schools. No fighting. No action.

- D: And all of a sudden, you run. Why run without any resistance? That was the order and that was what happened. So...

- Whose order was it?

- J: High politics.

- D: We don't know whose it was. It's difficult to know, probably it was an agreement between Tuđman and Milošević, that's where it came from. [...]

- Actually, high politics did you the most harm?

- J: That's right.

- D: Correct. Politics. The war in 1941 was a different thing. I mean, I know from stories when I was a kid, I remember. It was non-stop fighting.

- J: What kind of war was this? You could curl up under a warm blanket. Is that war?

- D: There was no war here. That was... People say what they want.

[...]

- J: He would salute and say "I surrender"... That's the real officer. One army wins, the other loses. I surrender this territory to you and that's it. That's the real thing. Don't kill. And this was high politics. We were supposed to be sent to Kosovo. [...]

- D: Right.

- J: To be an obstacle to the Albanians, a shield.

In this example as well:

- M: They pressed for Kosovo.

- G: Yes, we were supposed to go to Kosovo.

- M: You can't get off the highway, you're going to Kosovo. That was another sign that they made a deal and everything.

The final example shows a more complete narrative about conspiratorial forces of power, in which the narrator sees conspiracy as the driving agent of history:

- I believe that there is a plan. It remained unfinished since World War II, throughout the post-war [period], until this unfortunate present one [war of the 1990s]. But who did that and in what laboratory, so to speak, we don't know, I mean, I don't know. But I'm certain that it was all staged and worked out in detail. Worked out exceptionally. And now one literally has to be not blunt, but honest. That's if you want to know how I see it and what I think. How to best explain it...

These examples should be understood with regards to their external discursive position. They can be read as conspiracy theories only in relation to the dominant discourse, i.e. "official" or "legitimate" knowledge.

Folklorist Suzana Marjanić (2016) compares conspiracy theories to the genre of urban legend,<sup>9</sup> and finds in them the paranoid matrix Jack Bratich described in his *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Bratich 2008). Similar to politologist Nebojša Blanuša (2011b), she sees conspiracy theories as the interpretative framework and narrative pattern within which political events and processes are explained as the consequence of planned, secret work of power centres.<sup>10</sup> The crucial question Bratich poses is:

"Is a conspiracy theory defined primarily by its internal narrative characteristics or by its external discursive position? In other words, is it something inherent in the theory itself or is it more about the forums it appears in, its relation to other theories, and the legitimation accorded it?" (Bratich 2008:2).

This question was examined on another basis in folklore studies of legends and their genre characteristics. In many ways, conspiracy theories can be seen as so-called urban legends (for more on the genre, see Brunvand

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<sup>9</sup> For more on urban legends and the controversies related to the genre see Dégh 1977 and Brunvand 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Marjanić (2016) examines conspiracy theories on the example of the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370. The same author has already discussed the subject of conspiracy theories in an article published in 2018 (Marjanić 2018), in which conspiracy theories are considered as artistic, personal (supra-)interpretations of history.

2003; Dégh 2001), but also gossip (e.g. Dégh 1977, 2001:126, 131, more on gossip in general Besnier 2009,<sup>11</sup> Birchall 2006).<sup>12</sup>

If, for this occasion, and very roughly, we examine conspiracy theories as a narrative pattern in some characteristics related to legend, it becomes clear then why they rarely appear in oral communication as complete narratives, and more often as fragments.

I will not delve too deep here into genre characteristics, similarities and differences between legends, urban legends, gossips, and conspiracy theories. I will focus on one important common feature of the mentioned genres which lies at the centre of a large number of conspiracy theory studies – the one about the veracity of the narrative.

The issue of “veracity” or “falsehood” (primarily in oral transmission) is crucial for me because, on the analytical level, it could ultimately boil down to claiming that the “conspiratorial discourse” is false, irrational, pathological or pathologising (e.g. Hofstadter 2008; Robins and Post 1997), which is counterproductive for further analysis. In my research, I approach conspiracy theories differently, relying on Jack Bratich who considers them a metaconcept signifying the struggles over the meaning of the category (Bratich 2008:6).<sup>13</sup> He clearly opposes authors who think that they are a “sign of something else (individual mental condition, collective delusional state of mind, a cultural/political slackening)” (ibid.:14). On the contrary, he thinks conspiracy theory is a symptom, “but in the reversed perspective [...] a symptom of the discourse that positions it” (ibid.:16). They cannot be seen as independent of the reality from which they have emerged. On the contrary, they are “portals into the context that problematises them” (ibid.:19).

An idea is implicit in Bratich’s theory, which we have just outlined, that was first articulated in folklore studies in the 1970s on a corpus of

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<sup>11</sup> On the definition of gossip and the problems of defining, see Besnier 2009:19.

<sup>12</sup> “Within the remit of gossip, I am thinking not only of the face-to-face practice of speaking about an absent third party, e.g. among friends or colleagues, but also the speculations and revelations that fill the pages of tabloids and magazines” (Birchall 2006:92).

<sup>13</sup> Nebojša Blanuša also analyses them beyond the opposition between delusion and concealed truth. He therefore defines conspiracy theories as an interpretation pattern, structured as a dual phantasm with the possibility of “severance” (See Blanuša 2011a).

traditional and contemporary and/or urban legends<sup>14</sup> (to which some authors add conspiracy theory) and later questioned and developed many times over. According to that idea, if the audience did not recognise conspiracy theories as at least logical (in our case, even hyperlogical), if not entirely true, others would not be able to see them as false and/or pathological.<sup>15</sup> It works the other way around as well. The level of the narrator's and the audience's believing or not believing in conspiracy theories, i.e. legends and related genres, should in general be approached as a fundamental characteristic of the genre – believing in relation to not believing and vice versa.

Foklorists Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1976:119) think that “objective truth and the presence, quality, and quantity of subjective belief are irrelevant” for the exploration and understanding of legends. Crucially, legend “takes a stand and calls for the expression of opinion on the question of truth and belief” (*ibid.*). In that sense, I would like to stress that an analytical approach to conspiracy theories as a part of a community's oral tradition or popular knowledge (Birchall 2006) does not imply the questioning of their veracity or factual accuracy, but should be seen as a means of remembering and representation of historical events which, although subordinated in value to the so-called official knowledge and national narrative, coexist in the individual's everyday life and rub against dominant, authenticated narratives in dependence of which they come to existence. The narrator's and the recipient's uncertainty in the veracity of what is said is characteristic of the genre of oral legend and is an “almost obligatory concluding formula which maintains the mystery of the narrative” (Marks 2004:20), and is often found in parts of the text called the authentication formulae, that directly or indirectly guarantee the veracity of the narrative/theory, or express an ambivalence towards it (Rudan 2006).

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<sup>14</sup> The question of what is contemporary in urban legends remains unanswered. The act of narrating in the present day makes them contemporary.

<sup>15</sup> The question of whether agreements between politicians about the division of territory could be called conspiracy theory remains unanswered. They are “historical evidence”, but are not a part of official (ethnocentric) narratives, which are closer to myths and legends than the memory and understanding of the agents and witnesses of the historical events.



Relevant for this context is Bratich's idea that

“defining conspiracy theories in this legalistic manner is both semiotically dissonant and highly selective. Conspiracy theories *could have* this meaning in a neutral marketplace of ideas; they *could be* one kind of descriptive narrative among many. But this is not the case. Conspiracy theories exist as a category not just of description but of disqualification” (Bratich 2008:3).

Antonio Gramsci warned that “folklore must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously” (Gramsci 2000:362). He thought that “certain opinions and scientific notions, removed from their context and more or less distorted, constantly fall within the popular domain and are ‘inserted’ into the mosaic of tradition” (ibid.:361). In a nutshell, his differentiation between two cultures, high and low, is based on power relations, and not on quality, credibility, and veracity.<sup>16</sup> For him, as well as his entire intellectual heritage in folklore studies and numerous other disciplines, including Foucault's ubiquitous legacy,<sup>17</sup> the disqualification criticised and questioned by Bratich (2008), but also Birchall (2006), is not an analytical option. In her study *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Birchall 2006), when examining conspiracy theories, Clare Birchall chooses to focus on the knowledge believed in, rather than on those who believe. Birchall also sees popular knowledge as “one that moves beyond the truth or falsity of statements produced by a particular knowledge” (ibid.:xii). It encompasses conspiracy theories, urban legends, gossips, etc. Gramsci's interpretation is not known to some authors who recognised and treated conspiracy theories as “social curiosities” that influence the healthy (self)sustainability of a society and culture, and who primarily tackled the symptomatology related to conspiracy theory (e.g. Showalter 1997; Barkun 2003). Some studies, at least in part, almost belong to conspiracy theory discourse.

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<sup>16</sup> For more on that topic see Marković and Grgurinović 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault differentiates between official knowledges and subjugated knowledges. Subjugated knowledges “have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault 1980:83). Therefore, they are neither false nor true.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS POLITICS AND HISTORY FROM BELOW

Anthropologist Niko Besnier in his book *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics* sees anthropological interest (with an emphasis on linguistic anthropology) as “an interest in the mundane, the overlooked, and the trivial, out of which the anthropologist distils not-so-mundane insights into how humans organise life in groups” (Besnier 2009:vx). His discussion centres on the question how “intimate events and experiences are intertwined with large-scale processes” (ibid.:2). He says that local knowledge is transformed under the influence of globalisation in such a way that the understanding of the self changes – it is no longer dependent on and related to only certain localities, but also to the broader picture of national and global power relations. Such an approach places linguistic exchanges (in our case, the understanding of that which is said and not said in situations of anxiety) in the broad context of power relations and historical processes (cf. ibid.:2–3). Linguistic utterances, conversational and narrative genres have different social and political effects in specific institutional, ideological and historical contexts. Besnier stresses the importance of understanding verbal messages and narrative forms as those which

“are not just embedded in the literal form of what they say or do, but in the way in which what they say or do evokes, insinuates, and alludes to dynamics that may be quite distant from the immediate context” (Besnier 2009:11).

In order to understand the narrative form of our interlocutors’ experiences we do not need to examine decontextualised narrative forms (personal narratives, conspiracy theories, oral legends, gossips, etc., anchored in a historical context such as World War II, the war of the 1990s), but to analyse the ways in which they stand in relation to other oral forms and social actions, taking into account the complex context of narrating about a distant, emotionally charged experience, the passing of time, and the society in which they are marginalised, often demonised, and ungrievable (Butler 2009), etc.

Consistent with Besnier’s understanding of gossip, conspiracy theories can, as a related genre, be understood as “politics ‘from below’, particularly from the perspective of those whose voice is rarely heard in public or from

perspectives that are deemed ‘not to matter’” (Besnier 2009:12). Similarly, Jack Bratich sees conspiracy theories as “defined not merely by their strictly denotative, inherent properties, but by their discursive position in relation to a ‘regime of truth’” (Bratich 2008:3), whereby conspiracy theories are, at the same time, a type of narrative and “a sign of narrative disqualification” (ibid.:4). In her definition of popular knowledges (in which she includes conspiracy theories), Birchall says that politically, “they might question or support dominant ideological modes” and that

“they offer understandings of the world not bounded by (although certainly in various kinds of relation with) ‘official’, legitimated knowledge. In addition, these popular knowledges are often produced outside of [...] the ‘official’ sites of knowledge production – the university, government, the law” (Birchall 2006:22).

Our goal as researchers, I repeat, is not to support or contest the coexistence of competitive “regimes of truth”. Besides, conspiracy theories and related forms are not just subjugated knowledge. They should also be seen as emancipatory narratives which do not necessarily designate their protagonists as victims of historical events and processes. They resolve fear or de/remistify the object of past fear and heal present residues of anxiety, they soothe (but do not nullify) the feeling of guilt, they explain unintelligible past events. In contrast, these narratives have a (de)stabilising effect on the rival group or groups, who perceive oral narratives as conspiracy theories. They emerge from distrust and provoke distrust at the same time. “[C]onspiracy theory is itself a practice based upon the distrust of official histories even if it does not question the basic linear premise of historical narratives” (Birchall 2006:35), as is evident from our examples.

Sara Ahmed says that emotions “circulate between bodies”, “they ‘stick’ as well as move” (Ahmed 2014:4), they “are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects” (ibid.:7). The struggle for the right to be proud, to belong or not belong, to have a future, to articulate fear, shame, anxiety, regret, is thus continued through each new communication about historical events and personal experience immersed in them. Conspiracy theories can thus be seen as

discourse emerging from fear, silence, insecurity, and anxiety, as well as evoking the very same feelings in return, not necessarily in that order.

In legend, fear is present on all levels of the genre, since it is a genre of oral literature which formulates, processes, codifies, keeps and “recycles” the fears of the community. Conspiracy theories are also related to the feelings of fear and insecurity, as well as periods of social crises causing great and quick social changes, which “call existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question” (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017:324). Social crises, which war certainly is, contribute to the formulation of conspiracy theories “and may form the basis for how people subsequently remember and mentally represent a historical event” (ibid.:323). Some events more than others seek the explanation for their causes. In that context, there is a relevant study in the field of social psychology (Bruckmüller et al. 2017:270). With attribution theory as a starting point, it poses the question: what is it that begs explanation of past events with “common people” or “lay historians” (cf. Klein 2013)? They reach the ironic conclusion that “if we want to find out what begs explanation in history, we need to realise how history itself shapes what begs explanation” (Bruckmüller et al. 2017:270). Let us call to mind Bratich’s identical idea we mentioned before, of conspiracy theories as the portal into the context that problematises them (Bratich 2008:19).

In conclusion, I see my research as part of the aforementioned complex emotional, cognitive and narrative space of struggle for knowledge of events. We are never excluded from it, from fieldwork to the text and back. In the struggle for the right to the narrative as well as scholarly analysis between “the competing accounts for any event, the official version is not merely the winner in a game of truth — it determines who the players can be” (ibid.:7). Just as our interlocutors’ narratives, this work is theory formulation, creation of knowledge emerging from our insecurity, fear and anxiety, as well as our ethical responsibility to question and subvert simplified (militant) official narratives about war.

Hopefully, this work will be an addition to the understanding of minority, subjugated and popular knowledge expressed in the form of personal narratives with fragments of conspiracy theories that can be read only in relation to their external discursive position. The intention was not

to produce knowledge about concrete war events, but to examine, primarily from the perspective of folklore studies, the ways in which frightening and traumatic experience of displacement and (not) belonging can subsequently be formulated.

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## OSOBNA PRIPOVIJEST, TEORIJE ZAVJERE I (NE)PRIPADANJE: ISKUSTVA RATA, IZMJESTANJA I OTUĐENJA

Na osnovi etnografskoga terenskog istraživanja na području Hrvatske cilj je istražiti afektivne odgovore na institucionalizirane narative o genezi, tijeku i posljedicama sukoba 1990-ih godina u Hrvatskoj koji supostoje s podčinjenim, popularnim znanjima najčešće oblikovanim u obliku teorija zavjere. Autorica promatra načine oblikovanja različitih osobnih pripovijesti u kojima dominiraju motivi doma, izbjeglištva, (ne)pripadnosti te pripovijesti bliskih teorijama zavjere koje se upisuju u osobne pripovijesti. Teorije zavjere autorica promatra kao pokušaj razumijevanja težine i ambivalentnosti svakoga (po)ratnog iskustva, kao moguće razrješenje čvora nastalog na sjecištu osobnoga i kolektivnoga, kognitivnoga i emocionalnoga, etničkoga (većinskog, manjinskog) i građanskoga, poželjnoga i nepoželjnoga, doma i njegova napuštanja.

**Ključne riječi:** osobne pripovijesti, teorije zavjera, strah, anksioznost, raseljavanje, (ne)pripadanje, podčinjeno znanje, popularno znanje



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